

Study links depression, suicide rates to teen sex

By Karen S. Peterson, USA TODAY

A controversial new study links teen sexual intercourse with depression and suicide attempts.

The findings are particularly true for young girls, says the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank that sponsored the research. About 25% of sexually active girls say they are depressed all, most, or a lot of the time; 8% of girls who are not sexually active feel the same.

The study comes in the midst of a flurry of new reports on the sexual activity of teenagers. Such research is fodder for the growing debate on sex education in schools. The Bush administration backs abstinence programs.

The Heritage study taps the government-funded National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health. The Heritage researchers selected federal data on 2,800 students ages 14-17. The youngsters rated their own "general state of continuing unhappiness" and were not diagnosed as clinically depressed.

The Heritage researchers do not find a causal link between "unhappy kids" and sexual activity, says Robert Rector, a senior researcher with Heritage. "This is really impossible to prove." But he says that study findings send a clear message about unhappy teens that differs from one portrayed in the popular culture, that "all forms of non-marital sexual activity are wonderful and glorious, particularly the younger (teen) the better," he says.

The Heritage study finds:

- About 14% of girls who have had intercourse have attempted suicide ; 5% of sexually inactive girls have.
- About 6% of sexually active boys have tried suicide; less than 1% of sexually inactive boys have.